

Improving the teaching of religious education

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Three reports this year have expressed concerns about the quality of religious education (RE) in schools. A report in March from the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education, *RE: the Truth Unmasked. The Supply of and Support for Religious Education Teachers* found that about half of primary teachers and trainee teachers lacked confidence in teaching RE and about half of subject leaders in primary schools lacked the expertise or experience to undertake their role effectively.

A more recent report by Ofsted found that achievement and teaching in RE in 90 primary schools visited were less than good in six in ten schools. Factors which contributed to this were weaknesses in teachers' understanding of the subject; a lack of emphasis on subject knowledge; poor and fragmented curriculum planning; very weak assessment; ineffective monitoring; and teachers' limited access to effective training.

Regarding assessment, the Ofsted report identified that many teachers were confused about how to judge how well pupils were doing in RE. The third report, published in October by the Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC), also identifies this problem and recommends the development of new instruments for describing achievement in RE for teachers to use alongside the Department for Education's new attainment targets for National Curriculum subjects such as English, maths and science.

But what can be done? Ofsted continues to emphasise that, in the most effective RE teaching, enquiry is placed at the heart of learning and digital technology can be useful in supporting enquiry. Particularly in primary schools, teachers were increasingly using high-quality, web-based resources to stimulate pupils' learning and provide examples of 'living' religious practice. Other aspects of good practice were that senior leaders took an active interest in RE, discussed priorities with the subject leader and provided a wider whole-school context to promote improvement. In addition, effective subject leaders had a clear vision for RE.

Recommendations emerging from the reports included that schools should:

- improve lesson planning so that teaching has a clear and straightforward focus on what pupils need to learn and engages their interest
- raise the status of RE in the curriculum and strengthen the quality of subject leadership by improving the arrangements for developing teachers' subject expertise, sharing good practice, and monitoring the quality of the curriculum and teaching
- improve the quality of teaching and the curriculum to increase opportunities for pupils to work independently, make links with other subjects and tackle more challenging tasks
- make proper provision for continuing professional development for subject leaders, specialist teachers and others with responsibility for teaching RE in order to improve its quality
- review, where relevant, the widespread practice of using staff other than the classroom teacher to teach RE
- provide regular opportunities for RE subject leaders to train their colleagues in subject knowledge and planning and assessing RE.